



Three generations of Wylies include Sam, holding Bill's son, Garrett; Jim; Kathryn; Dave; and Bill, holding his daughter, Patricia.

Genetic Seed Savers

Octoraro Angus finds a niche in old genetic lines.

BY JANET MAYER

Sam Wylie III and his wife, Sherrill, are seed savers. Not the ordinary type — gardeners who preserve heirloom varieties of vegetables, fruits and grains — but preservers of genes in the Angus breed.

As owners of Octoraro Angus near Breezewood, Pa., the Wylies are using 30-year-old ampules of semen from bulls that are long dead. The names of sires like Emulation 31; Shoshone Viking; some of the Wye bulls, including Fabron of Wye; and PBC 707 1M F0203 (“Pioneer Rito F0203”) often are seen in the operation’s records.

“I feel we know more about old genetics than we do about new genetics, which is the reason we are using these bulls,” Wylie explains. “We have what are probably the last 30 ampules of semen from F0203, a bull known for longevity and maternal function, and I hope to get even better results than were gotten from the bull when he was used 20 years ago.”

One drawback Wylie has found in using these old bulls, however, is the “dead bull rule” of the American Angus Association. “It is perfectly OK to use semen from these dead bulls, but if the last owner of record is dead, then you have a heck of a time getting that owner to sign that certificate. Therefore,

there is semen from some of these good bulls out there that can’t be used,” Wylie says, adding that the policies implemented 30 years ago need to be changed if breeders want to go back to using the old semen.

Finding space to grow

Pedigrees deep in Angus seedstock bloodlines have been used in the Octoraro herd for more than 30 years. The herd was started in the late 1960s on a rented farm near Nottingham, Pa., by the Wylie family: Sam Wylie II; his wife, Kathryn; and their eight children. In later years, as the family scattered and urban development surrounded the farm, the eldest son, Sam III, made the decision to move the herd to a less-populated area of the state.

In 1990 Wylie relocated the herd to west-central Pennsylvania. The area had many small farms that were no longer in operation, giving him the opportunity to rent additional acreage for hay and pasture. Because the land is basically rough, the operation does no cultivation but uses about 250 acres for pasture and another 250 acres for hay.

“What we have here is old, marginal ground that we take care of a little bit and

then take the grass hay from it,” Wylie explains. “We try to keep our cattle so they like what we have to offer, which really isn’t much. Our cattle are bred for sustainability on a low-input, nonpampered, total-forage environment. We don’t feed any haylage, silage or grain; it’s just strictly all hay and pasture.”

How things are done

Changes in location resulted in changes in management and in the operation’s breeding program, producing what Wylie calls a more traditional type of Angus using the old genetics. He says the herd never has been outcrossed for frame or excessive growth. He sees the frame craze and the maximum-number game as detrimental to his operation’s program. Rather than selecting for a single trait or for maximums, the operation strives to produce cattle that are the optimum in all traits.

“The drought of 1999 proved that our cattle can survive through whatever nature brings their way,” he says. “I don’t believe there were hardly any blades of green grass in our whole county, but our cows raised calves, bred back on schedule and — once the rains came — put flesh back on.”

Wylie describes the operation's 85 brood cows as being high-capacity, easy-keeping, easy-fleshing, trouble-free females with longevity. They have mature weights between 1,050 and 1,250 pounds (lb.) on moderate frames with body condition scores (BCS) of 4.5-5.5.

Calving season starts the first of April and ends the last of May. In the operation's breeding program, artificial insemination (AI) is used, and some cows are flushed for embryo transfer (ET). All heifers are kept, calving at 2 years of age and usually going through the farm's sale after they calve as 4-year-olds.

Bulls usually are castrated, with four to six being kept intact. One or two are used for cleanup purposes and later sold; the others are sold as yearlings through private treaty. Occasionally steers are kept and fed as freezer beef, but if prices are up, they are sold as feeders.

In the past, the operation has done a lot of linebreeding. Wylie plans to do even more in the future, possibly even closing the herd to outside genetics. But for now, the use of older, proven bulls is bringing that goal closer.

Ties that bind

Even though Sam's three brothers — Jim, Dave and Bill — live considerable distances from the farm, they sometimes own cattle that are kept in the Octoraro herd. They gather twice a year, over the Memorial Day weekend and in late October, to work the cattle prior to weaning. In addition to the gathering's being a family social event, they vaccinate, castrate, apply fly controls, check for pregnancies and complete other tasks necessary for herd health.

"We don't like to put cattle into the chute too often, but things have gotten a lot easier since my brothers bought a new chute as a wedding present for Sherrill and me when we got married four years ago," Wylie says. "The chute came complete with a big bow and is probably one of the best presents we have ever received." It's especially handy at sale time.

The sale, appropriately named the "Genetic Seed Saver Sale," was first conducted in 1994, after many years of selling the cattle by private treaty. Wylie describes the sale as a low-key event with about 30 head of sale cattle displayed in grass paddocks on the farm. The cattle are not run through a sale ring at the time of sale, which he says simplifies things and allows the sale to move quickly.

In advance of the sale, they do a small amount of advertising in the *Angus Journal* and in several state and local publications. A simple sale book is sent to previous

A tradition of Angus

Coming from a family that has a long history as Angus breeders, Sam Wylie III likes to look over a collection of old, yellowed records that were written in longhand by his grandfather, Sam Wylie Sr., during his years as manager of the Ellis Estate Angus herd in Bryn Mawr, Pa. Especially interesting is a 1938 registration fee schedule from the Angus Association, then located at the stockyards in Chicago, Ill., that shows the cost of registering an Angus calf was \$1.50.

Wylie's father, the late Sam Wylie II, managed the Strawbridge Estate Angus herd at the original Octoraro Farm near Nottingham, Pa. When that herd dispersed in 1966, the Wylie family purchased many of the cattle for the base of their Octoraro Angus herd.

For many years, the eight Wylie children, three girls and five boys, showed cattle in 4-H and FFA, winning banners,

trophies and rosettes. The highlight of their showing careers was Sam III's winning the first National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest in 1967. He still prominently displays the trophy in his home.

Today the Angus tradition continues. Sam III and his wife, Sherrill, own and operate Octoraro Angus located near Breezewood, Pa. Jim Wylie manages the Angus herd at Lazy Lane Farms Inc. in Upperville, Va. Dave Wylie is employed by Frye Brothers, Angus breeders and livestock-equipment manufacturers in Quarryville, Pa. Bill Wylie is employed in the Foodservice Division of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) in Wooster, Ohio.

Hoping to perpetuate the family tradition, the youngest members of the family, Bill's two children — Patricia, 3, and Garrette, 1 — both own several females in the Octoraro herd.



Sam Wylie won the first National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest in 1967.

customers and interested parties.

"We also offer a video, which is excellent and has really helped since we are located in the East," he says.

"Our cattle are geared for the basically low-input, trouble-free type of operations, and we do sell quite a few cattle locally, but we seem to be expanding our customer list in other states where this type is needed. This year we sold cattle to breeders in Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia, as well as Utah, Washington, Montana, Georgia, Missouri, the Dakotas, Nebraska and Minnesota. I feel the video closes that distance gap, and we take bids by mail."

Wylie believes they have hit on a real niche by breeding cattle that can survive in their type of operation. He finds quite a few

breeders who are looking for basics and the old reliable type of trouble-free Angus cattle. A steadily increasing sale average would seem to prove he is correct, as would the many calls he has received from other breeders interested in the operation's breeding program.

"I think the breed is way off base with what we need in Angus cattle," he says. "I believe there is a niche of breeders who are out there that are doing things different, and it looks pretty good to me. The gene pool we are using is extremely rare, unique and scarce. And maybe we will never be mainstream, but I think there is a good future for these old reliable, trouble-free cattle. We don't need to sell to everybody, just to that niche."

